

**Polity Watch**

# Calling the Election: Nine Hotspots

by Patrick Reddy

As we enter another season of presidential politics, pundits are looking for clues to predict the winner. In the past, reporters looked to “bellwether” towns, counties, or states to gauge the national mood. Maine once had a great reputation as a bellwether. From Lincoln’s election in 1860 to the Depression in 1929, Maine voted for the national winner in 15 of 18 elections—an accuracy rate of 83.3% (leading to the aphorism “as goes Maine, so goes the nation”). But that changed in 1936 when Franklin Roosevelt won by a landslide (98.5% of the electoral vote) in a race that would realign politics for a generation, losing just two states, one of which was Maine. Thereafter, Maine lost its bellwether status, leading to the wisecrack: “as goes Maine, so goes Vermont.”

Before the invention of exit polls, networks used “key precincts” to call elections: If enough voters in swing areas were switching parties, then that would suggest that the White House would change parties. Today the public is inundated with “horserace” polls, but historical data show that certain areas and groups are a better bet for predicting the winner. Hopefully, these leading political indicators will prove more prescient than the residents of New England were in the 1930s.

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## New York City: White Catholic Neighborhoods

Since 1970, middle-class Catholics (about 25% of the electorate) have voted for every national winner, and the leading edge of the Catholic middle class has been Irish-American. The Irish in the New York City area have voted for every president-elect from 1945 on. The Borough of Queens has the biggest remaining concentration of Irish in New York City, particularly the neighborhoods of Flushing, Astoria, and Lynhurst. If the Democratic nominee can hold onto these Celtic neighborhoods (which are much less liberal than the Irish in New England), it is a good sign that he has successfully co-opted the center and is going to win. In a November survey of 5,000 respondents conducted by *Time* and CNN, Clinton received a 48%-42% national lead, and a 51%-40% lead among Catholics, over Republican frontrunner Bob Dole—the minimum needed for a Democratic victory given the GOP strength with white Protestants.

## Delaware

The nation’s second smallest state (in area) has the longest streak of picking presidential winners (11 straight, going back to 1952). “The First State” sits on the old North-South “border”: Delaware is northeast of Washington D.C., but has much southern flavor in both its white and black population. It is the only state outside the South to have had much of a rural black vote. Like the rest of the Northeast, it is heavily industrial. Unlike New York or Massachusetts, it has many transplanted Southerners. But the main reason for Delaware’s uncanny accuracy in picking winners is that the majority of its population is suburban and white collar, just like the nation.

## The Midwest

The region that has come closest to the national average in the 20th century has been the Midwest. (The Northeast and South have been the least prescient). In particular, the “industrial” states of the Midwest — Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri — have always come within a few points of the major parties’ national percentages and voted for the national winner in every year except 1916, 1960 and 1976. There is good reason for that: All the major states in the Midwest are a

combination of declining big cities, prosperous suburbs, and stable rural areas. Their share of voters who are black, Catholic, white Protestants, or Jewish is very close to the national averages. (Incidentally, the above-mentioned four groups make up over 80% of voters everywhere). Hence, their excellent track records as predictors. Four states have missed voting for the winner less than three times in this century; three of them—Ohio, Illinois and Missouri—are in the industrial heartland. (In Richard Scammon’s and Benjamin Wattenberg’s *The Real Majority*, the typical voter was a 47-year-old machinist from Dayton, Ohio.) The November *Time/CNN* Poll showed President Clinton with a 48-42% edge over Dole. So these states are going to be closely contested and will predict the national winner again.

Two states in this region have only missed twice in the last 100 years: Ohio in 1944 and 1960, and Illinois in 1916 and 1976. Are there any cities or areas in these two states that swing with the nation? Montgomery County in Ohio (which contains Dayton) has voted for

the winner every year except 1944, 1948, 1960, and 1980. This old industrial city, now famous for hosting the Bosnia peace talks, is mainly white Protestant and about 25% Catholic (the same as the nation) with a large inner-city black population and slight, but growing concentrations of Hispanics and Asians.

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There is a neighborhood in Chicago that has an even better track record. The Forest Glen-Sauganash section of Chicago on the northern edge of the city has voted for every national winner since 1919. These two neighborhoods were annexed by Chicago early in this century and today look more like a suburb than downtown. The neighborhood is populated by upper-level city employees, particularly the fire and police departments. Largely Protestant until the Depression, most of its voters today are Italian and Polish Catholics. These voters are the remnants of the Roosevelt-Truman-Kennedy Democrats: not anti-government (they work with or for the city), but skeptical of liberal social issues like gay rights and affirmative action.

### The South: North Carolina

From the Civil War era until 1932, the South voted solidly Democratic while the country was largely Republican. The South was an integral part of the Democratic coalition until it dropped out in the 1960s. The South today is now solidly Republican—it was the only region to support Bush in 1992—and not likely to automatically predict the winner next year, unless, of course, the GOP wins in a landslide. The *Time/CNN* Poll had Dole slightly ahead in the South.

While not a national bellwether, there are clues found in various southern states as to how the South as a whole is going. North Carolina comes the closest to the Southern average in terms of racial breakdown, transplanted Northerners, education and industry. And the “Piedmont” section in the middle of the state, running from the Charlotte area across to Raleigh, has come within five points of the Southern regional vote totals in every year since 1928.

### The West

Western states have emerged as the fastest growing region over the last 30 years. From the Civil War until about 1950, the West was a swing area. In 1952, it broke sharply for Eisenhower and stayed Republican except in Democratic landslide years like 1964. With the South turning so strongly Republican, Bill Clinton must win California and a few other Western states (Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Hawaii, New Mexico) to assemble an electoral majority of 270 votes. There have been several outstanding bellwethers to watch out West.

*Wyoming’s Laramie County (Cheyenne)* supported every national winner since Wyoming’s admission as a state in 1890 down to the 1970s. However, Laramie has now become almost totally dominated by suburban whites, who are very conservative. Laramie has now voted against the only two Democratic presidents of the last 20 years: Carter in 1976 and Clinton in 1992. So, it is no longer infallible. But it still does give a decent portrait of “New West” metropolitan areas.

*Crook County in rural Oregon* had the best record of any county in the country. From 1860 to 1988, Crook voted for every national winner. However, Ross Perot split the anti-incumbent vote with Bill Clinton in 1992 to allow George Bush to win 37-35% in this logging county. Still, Crook County remains a good barometer for how Western rural working class voters are going. The *Time/CNN* Poll showed Dole to be 12 points ahead in the rural West, which is the perennial result.

*Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley*, with 20% of the electoral votes needed for a national majority, holds the key to President Clinton’s re-election and probably has veto power over future Democratic nominees. And, over the last 100 years, California is second only to Ohio and Illinois in picking presidential winners, missing only in 1912, 1960 and 1976.

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While many trends in popular culture begin in the Golden State, it is also a great political precursor: Republicans have polled 48% and Democrats 47% of the cumulative national vote since 1932. The figures for California mirror the nation’s exactly. The best predictor of statewide success in the Golden State has been the San Fernando Valley section of Los Angeles. This suburb is located north of downtown LA over the



### Polity Watch

Santa Monica mountains and was annexed by the city in 1909 in order to get Los Angeles a new water supply (as immortalized in the Jack Nicholson film "Chinatown"). Like Forest Glen-Sauganash in Chicago, "the Valley" is essentially a suburb within a city. Once nearly all white Gentile middle class, the Valley now represents all of LA: it has pockets of black, Asian and gay voters with rapidly increasing numbers of Hispanics and Jews. The San Fernando Valley has voted for the winner of California in every national election since 1920 (no data was available for prior elections). Recent polls have shown Clinton with a solid lead over Dole in California — and ahead in the suburbs.

*New Mexico*, known as the "Land of Enchantment," is the nation's number one bellwether state, but needs an asterisk next to this claim: It was not admitted to the Union until 1912. But in the 21 elections since statehood, it has only voted against one national winner—Jimmy Carter in 1976—an accuracy rate of over 95%. At first blush, a state that is almost 40% Hispanic and 50% rural—the corresponding national figures are 9% and 23% respectively—would seem to be an odd choice for best reflecting the nation. But New Mexico's Hispanic population has many voters who are the descendents of European-Spanish landowners. They tend to be 10-15 points more Republican than Hispanics in Texas or California (and the poorest Hispanics have a very low turn-

out). In short, New Mexico Hispanics are more of a swing vote (like the Irish or Italians) than a dependable minority voting bloc. More importantly, New Mexico's population has surged from being almost all Hispanic and Indian in 1912 to an Anglo majority by the 1930s. This in-migration was truly a cross section of America: liberal artists to Santa

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Fe, working class Americans from all regions to work on the numerous military bases, wealthy Anglo landowners, and the rootless middle class looking to get a fresh start. New Mexico should be tight in 1996: Clinton is popular with Hispanics and liberals, but hated by Anglo conservatives. With Clinton's approval ratings consistently between 45 and 50%, 1996 is shaping up to be an election so close that the switch of just one state could swing the national outcome (as was the case in 1916 and 1960). Don't be surprised if that one state is New Mexico.

### Summary

What all these swing groups have in common is that they are middle class, usually suburban or semi-suburban homeowners within a major metropolitan area, and almost 100% white. *This information can save reporters and pollsters some time and money.* Interviewing voters in Queens will show if President Clinton is holding on to the East Coast Catholic middle class. Spending time in the Piedmont will tell us if the South will stay largely Republican. Surveys in Chicago's Forest Glen-Sauganash section and Dayton, Ohio can gauge how the candidates are doing in the crucial Midwest battleground states. A visit to Albuquerque and Santa Fe will indicate what moderate Western voters think of the race. And hanging out with the Valley boys and girls will determine whether Mr. Clinton can win vital California. All of these bellwether areas broke for the GOP's local candidates in 1994; it will be interesting to see how many President Clinton can hold in 1996. The Northeast is now the most Democratic region in the nation, so if the President is in trouble there, he's finished. The South and rural West are almost certainly gone for Mr. Clinton, so the Midwest and West Coast hold the key to Bill Clinton's future. Watch the north sides of Chicago and Los Angeles. If he carries both Illinois and California, he'll probably squeak through to a second term.



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